

CHAPTER 21

Doing Good by Doing Little? University Responsibility in a Violent Setting

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PREAMBLE

Lebanon's very name evokes images of civil strife and destruction, of a society almost hopelessly divided and open to exploitation by state and non state actors well beyond its borders. It is estimated that as many as 100,000 (out of a population of ca. 3.5 million) Lebanese lost their lives in the years of civil war, 1976-1990, in no small measure due to sectarian animosities. Over a longer period there has been a series of political assassinations of prominent Lebanese, but also including in 1984 the then president of the American University of Beirut (AUB), Dr Malcolm Kerr. Since the fall of 2004 the assassination campaign has accelerated, punctuated by a short vicious war carried out by Israel against Lebanon but precipitated by Hizbollah, a radical Shi'ite party with a history of violence dating back to the attack on the US Marine barracks in 1983. Even old hands in the analysis of the Lebanese scene are increasingly worried that the country may drift back to the civil disturbances of 1976-90.

Yet Lebanon has one of the best-educated populations in the Middle East. It enjoyed nearly two decades of growth and prosperity after the Second World War and until the civil war left it floundering economically. It is a heavily urban society with at least half the population living in Beirut. Its educational infrastructure, especially at the university level, is the most developed in the Arab world. For many years after the Second World War, Lebanon was the darling of social scientists focusing on the "Third World". It seemed to

demonstrate that a multi-sectarian society could function democratically, develop economically through reliance on private markets, and achieve very high levels of literacy and education. It seemed to confirm the assumptions of the structural-functional school of analysis that foresaw a kind of linear trajectory of economic growth, the building of educated, professional middle classes, and the spread of democracy. The main figures contributing to this view were Daniel Lerner, Walt Rostow, Gabriel Almond and Seymour Lipset, among many others. In 1975 the country and the dream came undone.

It is probably no surprise to us now that literacy and prosperity are not universal solvents of sectarian or blood identities. US society in the past few decades has demonstrated that amply. I doubt that my university, over its long history, ever bought fully into the dream or myth about Lebanon; nor did it or does it give in to the gloom that envelops the region today.

The university over which I preside, the American University of Beirut, has thrived in this prickly, dangerous environment since its founding in 1863 as a private, not-for-profit university, incorporated in the State of New York. At that time it was known as the Syrian Protestant College, reflecting its Christian evangelical origins. With the creation of the French protectorate of Lebanon after the First World War, carved out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, the university had to change its name to reflect the new reality. It became the American University of Beirut. It also very quickly became co-educational, several decades before many of its peer institutions in the United States.

Today, 141 years since it graduated its first students, AUB has become a fully secular, non sectarian institution made up almost equally of male and female students. Our total enrolment is at present about 7,000 with 5,900 undergraduates. The university has six Faculties: Arts and Sciences, Engineering and Architecture; Agricultural and Food Sciences; Health Sciences; Medicine (including a School of Nursing); and Business. AUB has never entered into the training of lawyers.

We are in numbers and in ethos an undergraduate institution with a growing graduate and research superstructure. We more resemble Princeton than MIT in this respect. Because of the emphasis on undergraduate education, we are very concerned about the general values of personal responsibility, civility and citizenship that we seek to instil in our young students fresh out of the lycées and high schools of Lebanon and several other countries in the region (about 20% of our students are non-Lebanese). Because Lebanon's political system is explicitly based on sectarian representation, our emphasis on non-sectarianism aims to define another reality. In describing ourselves as "secular" (a term frequently confused in Lebanon and elsewhere with atheism) we emphasize respect for all religions but honour none in particular. I shall revisit this theme in greater detail below.

A PRESIDENTIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PUZZLE

When Luc Weber asked me to prepare a paper on the university's role in mitigating communal and sectarian strife, or, put more positively, contributing to better understanding among diverse groups, I remember feeling mildly irritated by the question, mainly because the American University of Beirut, as an institution, does nothing formal in this domain. It is not university policy nor a part of our mission statement to promote inter-communal or inter-sect understanding in Lebanon or in the broader region from which our students are drawn.

With reflection, I realized that part of my irritation stemmed from the feeling that perhaps AUB should have such a policy, and therefore, as president, I asked myself why am I not doing anything or at least not doing more? The answer to that question is the substance of my contribution. The irony for me is that because the political and social environment in which AUB operates is in such need of the values we espouse, we cannot risk espousing them too openly or too aggressively. I suspect that I am not the first president of AUB to come to confront this paradox.

The unwritten philosophy of AUB, which I inherited when I became president in 1998, is to lead by doing. In American parlance, we walk the walk but do not talk the talk, at least extra-murally. We stress to our students, staff and faculty the institutional values of tolerance, mutual respect and achieving status within the university solely on the basis of merit.

Our founder, the Reverend Daniel Bliss, in 1871, put the core message as eloquently as anyone: "This College is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to colour, nationality, race, or religion. A man, white, black or yellow, Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or heathen, may enter and enjoy all the advantages of this institution for three, four or eight years; and go out believing in one God, in many gods, or in no God. But it will be impossible for anyone to continue with us long without knowing what we believe to be the truth and our reasons for that belief."

By 1920 the mildly sexist phrasing of President Bliss's remarks was corrected when AUB became fully co-educational, admitting women to undergraduate study.

For the most part successive university administrations have tried to demonstrate our values within our walls through student-faculty relations, sect-blind admissions, internal governance procedures such as an elected faculty senate, the practice of academic freedom and critical thinking, the fostering of student activities including elected student bodies, a student-run newspaper and several dozen student clubs. This is our "walking the walk". We hope that students will absorb these values and to the extent possible practise them once they leave our campus. To some extent that has been the case, but it is

only fair to say that survival, let alone prospering, in the real world of Lebanon and other countries in the region often comes at the expense of our values.

Why have we not aspired to do more? AUB is, after all, a highly respected model of best practice not only as an institution of higher learning but as a large, complex private organization that has considerable weight in the Lebanese economy. AUB is Lebanon's largest private employer with nearly 3,000 non-academic employees concentrated mainly in our 400-bed hospital. We have about \$120 million in capital projects underway, and our operating budget is today is about \$175 million. We employ many, buy a lot, and contract regularly for consulting services of all kinds. We are looked to for best practice standards in financial and project management, medical ethics, human resource policies, bidding procedures as well as in standard academic activities like admissions and faculty recruiting and promotion. Some years ago I delivered a speech on cheating and plagiarism at AUB, among students and among faculty. I argued that our statistics on these phenomena were worrisome, but not greatly different from what is found in the US. I stressed that this is not a cultural issue. Nonetheless, Beirut newspapers picked up on my remarks and several commentators stated that if AUB has a problem with cheating, think how much worse it is elsewhere in our society (and therefore, by implication, excusable).

I do not have a convincing answer to my own question about AUB's relatively low profile on issues of sectarianism and civility, but rather only a number of "considerations". First is the issue of when does an activist institutional role on inter-communal understanding step over the line into formal politics? Lebanon's political system is constitutionally based on religious sects. It seems to me that the line between political and social arenas is virtually non-existent, so that if we go outside our walls, we may be squarely in the political realm. I do not think any university president anywhere would want to put his or her institution in that position. To be politically neutral in Lebanon is, to some extent, to be socially neutral. Only if the political and social arenas impinge directly and detrimentally on the university's ability to function normally and honour its values would we respond institutionally. The area most likely to be breached is that of academic freedom, but mercifully I have not had to deal with any serious attempt on the part of the Lebanese government or on the part of Lebanese politicians to influence our academic practices.

Second, the stakes of any taking of public stances are higher in Lebanon and the region as a whole than they are in North America and Europe. I think often of the debates raging in the US over the teaching of evolutionary theory and the attempts of school boards and state legislatures to impose their own views of what is acceptable on schools, colleges and universities. It may seem curious to some that evolutionary theory does not produce the same heat in the Middle East as it does in the United States, but there are other issues that do — and they have to do with religion, gender and geo-politics. However,

my point is that no matter how impassioned the debates in the US, violence is not a likely by-product. In parts of the Middle East, including Lebanon, it is a likely by-product. A university has to choose very carefully where and when to use the “bully pulpit”.

Third, without any overt attempts at coordination, the most prestigious universities in Lebanon have tended to converge in internal practices. Whether American in inspiration, like AUB and the Lebanese American University, sectarian like Haigazian, Notre Dame, and Balamand, or of continental/French inspiration like the Université Saint Joseph, we have all adopted similar practices and values. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for Lebanese University, the public giant which absorbs about 60% of all Lebanon’s university students. For many years LU has been a highly-politicized, religiously divided, and poorly administered institution. Because its parlous state has resulted from the machinations of Lebanon’s political class, more successful institutions, like mine, are not inclined to reach out to LU. That is a pity because LU has many fine faculty members carrying on under profoundly discouraging conditions and many gifted students who surely deserve a great deal more than they are receiving.

Finally, I have not wanted to go outside AUB’s walls purely for public relations advantage. Inter-faith dialogue, respect for the religious “other”, non sectarianism are all slogans that elicit positive responses. Throwing them about in public discourse may be and frequently is no more than cheap talk. The political class mouths them constantly. It should not surprise an academic audience that there is an inverse relationship between the frequency with which they are invoked and the degree to which they are practised. It is mainly talk and very little walk.

Yet there is a foundation upon which one could build. The 1945 Lebanese constitution simultaneously enshrines sects as the basis for political representation and calls for the gradual phasing out of sectarian politics. At the end of the civil war the Ta’if agreement shifted the sectarian balance slightly and reiterated the call for an end to sectarian politics. Poll after poll shows that Lebanese youth want to get away from sectarianism, stating (but is it true?) that they have no problem with inter-sect marriage, civil marriage and non sectarian political representation. The same polls show a simultaneous instinct to fasten more intensely onto one’s sect. The danger that leads many to hope wistfully that sects will diminish in importance is the same danger that drives the same people toward greater reliance on sect and clan.

You may see where I am going. The single most important step toward the lessening of communal tensions in Lebanon would be to reform the political system, to re-write the constitutional guidelines to de-emphasize sectarianism. But that is precisely where AUB, as an institution, should not go. It is none of our institutional business. Faculty members and students are free to go there.

Indeed our former chair of the Department of Political Studies and Administration was secretary to a national commission to draft a new electoral law. Our newly founded Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs is beginning to address the issue of constitutional reform.

I return to my mild irritation. It probably reflects a guilty conscience. I see for example that St Joseph University has established an Institute for Islamo-Christian Studies which will offer a masters degree in the subject matter. Perhaps AUB should be moving in the same direction. I cannot help but note, however, that St Joseph had to cancel its student elections in the fall of 2006 because of inter-Christian fighting among its students.

CONCLUSION

The past few years in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine have shown how deep religious fissures run. There is no reason to be coy here. The main source of increased sectarian violence has stemmed from the operations of a minority of Muslims who have claimed some sort of divine sanction for what they undertake. Their movement has not only raised the deep-seated fears of non-Muslims but those of their co-religionists as well. In describing the stakes of the current struggles the word “existential” is increasingly used. In such circumstances the line between protecting the university and entering the political realm disappears. Perhaps it is time to go outside our walls and make sure our vision for an alternative to the extremists of all stripes is made clear.

There is a final consideration. Having the word “American” in the official name of AUB has been, 90% of the time, an asset, and that continues to be the case today. Nonetheless since 9/11 I have been acutely conscious of the dangers of an “American” president of an “American” university preaching, or seeming to preach about institutional values, at least outside our walls. In an altercation with a local AUB alumni group a few years back, I was referred to by some disgruntled alumni as the Paul Bremer of AUB. As an American with no family connections in the Middle East or Lebanon, I can resist being drawn into the family, sectarian and clan politics of the region. My presumed neutrality is in that respect a great asset. But my American origins, when it comes to defence of our institutional values could be used against me, but more importantly against my university.